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heart, binds the whole nation in indissoluble union, is popular, is democratic, is individual, is universal.

A truly spiritual and rational religion, like genuine political liberty, can exist in any large measure only in highly civilized and intelligent communities. The progress of true religion depends on the progress of men in self-respect, self-control, and right reason. And to secure this progress, after the infancy of society is passed, freedom is requisite. It is because our community is the freest that the world has known, and is gaining, we believe, in that moral order which results from the qualities generated by freedom, that we look forward with confidence to the advance of true religion among us; and united with this confidence, we have the firmest faith that Christianity, as understood and taught by Jesus, not as interpreted by mediæval churches and their modern ministers, will be the supreme law and bond of our free society,—the law at once of liberty and love, the religion of perfect freedom.

ART. X.—CRITICAL NOTICES.

- 1.—*The Biographical Writings of JAMES PARTON.* Boston: Ticknor and Fields. 1866. 9 vols. 12mo.
 1. *Life and Times of Aaron Burr.* 2 vols.
 2. *Life of Andrew Jackson.* 3 vols.
 3. *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.* 2 vols.
 4. *General Butler in New Orleans.* 1 vol.
 5. *Famous Americans of Recent Times.* 1 vol.

THERE are episodes in the history of America of which the interest is universal, but the larger part of it has been unquestionably dull. The beginnings of a state, however powerful it may be about to become, retain their insignificance to the imagination until a light is poured back upon them from a distant future, which shows them in their true importance as the sources of succeeding greatness. Our past history is every year of more and more interest, as the people become more conscious of nationality; as the principles upon which our institutions rest manifest their effects more plainly; as the coun-

try grows in material power; and as its influence on the affairs of the world — an influence both moral and material of extraordinary force — is more distinctly felt. “Next to the Christian religion,” says a recent English writer, “the American government and constitution is the most precious possession which the world holds.” As the originality of the American political and social system is recognized, the history of its development becomes interesting; small things ally themselves with great, and are recognized matter of concern, not only to ourselves, but to the rest of the civilized world.

But even before the importance of America was so fully established as it now is, our history need not have gained such repute for dulness if it had been well treated. Guicciardini succeeded in making the entertaining history of Florence terribly tedious, and our historians were in general little more enlivening than the wearisome Italian. Till we come to the present generation there is not one name of much literary distinction among them; and not even yet have we an historian of the first order. If we could have a Macaulay, no one would hereafter complain of the dulness of American history.

That the writers, and not the history, are now at fault, has been shown by the success of Mr. Parton's works. His *Lives of Franklin, Burr, and Jackson* include a great part of the history of the country. If we desired to give to any uninstructed reader a vivid picture of the historic social conditions and political movements of the period from the birth of Franklin, in 1706, to the death of Webster, in 1852, we would put into his hands these three *Lives*, and that remarkable series of biographical essays, with the chief of which the readers of this Review are already familiar, and which now appear collected in the volume of “*Famous Americans*.” These books are as interesting as they are instructive, and they probably have done more to enlighten the public in regard to the history of the period included in them than any other existing works.

Mr. Parton's first aim has, indeed, not been historical; but had it been so, he could hardly have chosen a better method of attaining it than that which he has adopted in writing his biographies. The social development of America is the most important feature of its history; and biography-treated as Mr. Parton treats it necessarily involves special attention to the conditions of the society in which the men whose lives he recounts fulfilled their careers, and by the influence of which their characters were moulded and their conduct in great measure determined.

Mr. Parton's success in his work has been so decided, and he has established such a position for himself in our literature, that the appear-

ance of a new and uniform edition of his books affords a welcome occasion for criticism to analyze their special merits, and to point out those defects by which their value is diminished, and the most serious of which, we are confident, it lies within the author's power to remove.

In one of his later essays Sainte-Beuve, the master of what may be called the biographical school of modern critics, in speaking of the method which he has followed, believing it to be the best in the examination of books and of the talents of their authors, says: "Literature, the literary product, is not, in my view, distinct, or at least separable, from the rest of the man and from his organization. I can relish a work, but it is difficult for me to judge it without a knowledge of the man himself. The literary study leads me naturally to the moral study." It is a difficult and a delicate task to apply this rule in the case of a living author, but we may refer, without violation of propriety, to such facts at least concerning him as are supplied us by accounts already published, and which throw light upon the character of his books.

Mr. Parton, it is stated, was born in England in 1822, and was brought when five years old to this country. His early youth was passed in the city of New York and its neighborhood, and it is not unlikely that the contrast between the first impressions of childhood and those made upon him during his boyhood in New York served to develop the liberality of sentiment and freedom of thought and of expression which are characteristic of his writings. The temper and tone of his intellect are essentially American. The spirit of inquiry, the self-confidence, the tendency to draw rapid conclusions, the humane disposition, the good-natured charity, and the practical moral sense, which are among the marked mental traits of the American people, are fully exhibited in Mr. Parton's books. His style, moreover, sometimes gives evidence of his sharing in that want of the artistic sense, or at least of artistic cultivation, and in that deficiency of severe intellectual training, which are common to the majority even of our most eminent writers. He possesses in full measure the intelligence and the good common-sense which are national excellences; and what gives to his work its most striking individuality, and secures for it not only distinguished temporary success, but permanent repute, is the fact that it is so genuine and characteristic a representation of the prevailing mental and moral conditions of the nation. Mr. Parton is the product of his age and of his country. He is strictly an American author.

The qualities of his thought and style are doubtless due in considerable measure to his having been connected for a time, at the outset of his literary career, with the newspaper press of New York.

Experience in writing for a newspaper is excellent training for one who has sufficient native intellectual force, or has already acquired sufficient culture, to protect him against the injurious effects of forced rapidity of production, such as loose thinking and loose writing, unconsidered assertion, and the attempt to secure attention by overcharged statement or smart turn of phrase. In spite of Mr. Parton's natural good sense and abilities, the style of his books is not free from faults of this sort, in part at least attributable to his early training, and in part, no doubt, to the fact that, being obliged to support himself by his pen, the necessity of rapid production has compelled him often to write with less care and finish than he himself would have desired. He shares, too, the common American disregard of formality and conventionalism, and seems sometimes to be burdened with a fear lest a too strict regard to the conventions and rules of literary art might result in depriving his style of vigor, vivacity, and individuality. Too great concern for purity of style is, no doubt, as bad as too little, and reliance upon the authority of good writers is often the resort of bad ones. Politian says well, "*Ut bene currere non potest qui pedem ponere studet in alienis tantum vestigiis, ita nec bene scribere qui tanquam de præscripto non audet egredi.*" But Mr. Parton occasionally dares too much, and in his desire to avoid stiffness and dulness sometimes falls into colloquial inelegance, carelessness of diction, or overloading of expression.

He has himself given, in an unpublished letter, an account of his beginning as a writer of books, which we venture to print as an illustration of his literary life:—"From early in life I have wondered why such men as Dickens and Thackeray should choose to expend themselves upon fiction, when they could find true stories to tell so much more interesting; and I often used to say, Some day a man will come along who will create a new branch of the fine arts,—Biography. But it never crossed my mind that I should attempt anything of the kind, for I knew very well that to make a real and vivid biography would require an amount and minuteness of investigation which could never be repaid in money, nor done without money. One day, while I was employed in the *Home Journal*, I dined at a restaurant with the Mason Brothers, publishers, and the conversation fell upon books. It happened to say, 'What an interesting story could be made out of the life of Horace Greeley, if a person could only get at the facts.' One of them said, 'Why don't you do it?' I replied that it would require an expensive journey and a year of labor, and I could not afford it. A few days after, they offered to advance the money requisite; and so the book was done. In New Hampshire and Vermont, I went from house to house, making inquiries. The book sold thirty thousand cop-

ies, and yielded me \$2,000 above the cost of producing. Upon that most insufficient capital I had the temerity to set up in business as a book-maker."

The same fidelity and patience of research and investigation which he displayed in collecting the materials of his *Life of Greeley* have been shown by Mr. Parton in his later and more important works. In preparing for his *Life of Jackson*, he made a tour through the Carolinas, Tennessee, Alabama, and other States,—a third of the Union in all. The list of "Publications containing information respecting Andrew Jackson, his times and contemporaries," prefixed to the work, extends over thirteen pages in double column of fine print. "For many months," he says, "I was immersed in this unique, bewildering collection." The traces of his indefatigable industry appear in every chapter.

But even industry and fidelity are of little value in a biographer or an historian, if they be not accompanied by a love of truth, and directed by an honest and impartial spirit. It is Mr. Parton's highest praise, that he has honestly endeavored to tell the truth concerning the men of whom he has written and the events in which they were engaged. It may be that, like other historians, he has sometimes fallen into errors of statement, but there has been no wilful suppression or alteration on his part,—no desire to put a false face upon facts. His judgment may be sometimes at fault, but no one who is free from prejudice will question the fairness of his intention. Many of his opinions of character and estimates of motive and influence in regard to persons that have been the subject of such heated discussion and such partisan feeling as those whose lives he has written, must give occasion to question and dissatisfaction. The truth itself is not agreeable to all, and is not always to be reached. Mr. Parton has offended many men of honest convictions differing from his own. His *Life of Aaron Burr* was bitterly attacked as injurious to the cause of morals, in its exhibition of the brilliant and attractive qualities of this gifted, unprincipled, and wretched man. There are certainly passages in the *Life* in which Mr. Parton runs counter to the generally accepted moral notions of the age. His perception of the more delicate moral relations is not always so quick as his sense in regard to the plainer distinctions of right and wrong. But the effect of the work as a whole upon any intelligent reader is, in our judgment, to bring out impressively and distinctly the true moral of such a life;—that the most brilliant and amiable qualities, if unsustained by right principle, are no foundation for happiness or for esteem; that fine talents, if ill used, lead to misery and dishonor; and that the one thing needful for the attainment of permanent welfare is a controlling sense of duty and of right. If any man is led astray by the *Life of Aaron Burr*, it will be one who is incapable of reading the plainest and most solemn lesson.

As a writer of biography, Mr. Parton belongs to the school of Plutarch, and not to that of the heroic biographers. His own good sense has led him to follow the method of his great master, as set forth by him in the *Introduction to the Life of Alexander*. "The most glorious exploits," says Plutarch, "do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men. Sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever. Therefore, as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which the character is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and endeavor by these to portray their lives." Mr. Parton sets a full value on the anecdotes, expressions, and jests that reveal and illustrate character. He avoids disquisition, though perhaps he indulges himself too frequently in brief reflections on matters only incidentally connected with his main subject, and is a little too ready to pronounce an off-hand judgment on topics that require more deliberate treatment. But one of the chief merits of his books, and the one which secures to them their popularity, is the great proportion of narrative which they contain. They are stories, and stories of real men. His power of narration is excellent; he is clear, concise, and animated; he understands the points of his story, and he presents them sharply to the intelligence of his reader. He is never drowsy; his powers are always at his command. Not often epigrammatic, his style is frequently distinguished by condensed vigor of statement or description.

A clear eye, a knowledge of men, and shrewd sense, take the place in him of the higher qualities of imagination and of penetrative insight. He is seldom picturesque, seldom lifted by enthusiasm, and never lifts his reader above the regions of the earth. It is curious to observe how rarely any reference to the aspects of nature, or to the subtle spiritual influences of life, are found in his books. There is very little of the poet in him.

But whatever allowance we may have to make for deficiency of imagination, for faults of taste, or for imperfect culture, his books remain excellent in their kind, and have a merit beyond that of literary art due to the freshness of their author's sympathy with what is liberal and generous and good in life. His spirit is essentially humane. His religion is to serve man; it concerns itself only with man's duty to man. He desires to make man better, wiser, and thus more free, and more capable of maintaining and improving those institutions of society and politics which are distinctively American.